

## **Public Comments on the 2007 Farm Bill**

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Presented by: William P. Hunter, Ph.D.  
Agriculture Instructor  
Pratt Community College  
348 NE SR61  
Pratt, KS 67124  
620-672-5641, X239  
Email: billh@prattcc.edu  
Currently serving as Region II Vice President,  
National Association of Agricultural Educators

Good morning. I am Dr. Bill Hunter, agriculture instructor at Pratt Community College in Pratt, Kansas. I am currently serving as the Region II Vice President for the National Association of Agricultural Educators, the national professional organization for agricultural educators. My comments today will focus on the importance of strong agricultural education programs to the future of a healthy agriculture industry in the United States. These comments specifically address Question 2: The competitiveness of U.S. agriculture in global and domestic markets.

For agriculture to prosper in the future, it is critical that there be an adequate supply of trained workers to enter the field. The federal government has had a long history of support for agricultural education programs since the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917. Federal money for vocational education in agriculture has helped to train millions of students over the years for entry into agricultural jobs, as well as working with young and adult farmers to update their skills. Most of these students have gone on to long, productive careers in agriculture and agriculturally-related businesses because of the skills they have learned in the classroom and laboratory, and applied in their supervised agriculture experience programs and through the student leadership program, the FFA.

There are more than 7,000 agriculture education programs in the United States. This represents only 33 percent of the high schools in the country. There are many areas that are unserved by a local high school-based agricultural education program, even in rural areas highly dependent on agriculture to fuel the local economy. While agricultural education programs began in rural areas, there have been programs in some urban high schools for many years. (Examples include the W.B. Saul High School in Philadelphia and Booker T. Washington High School in New Orleans.) Some agricultural education programs have been added in urban schools in the last twenty years, such as the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, but there are many urban and suburban areas that are unserved as well.

In addition to high schools and community colleges without agricultural education programs, USDA's own figures show that agriculture programs at four-year colleges and universities are not turning out enough graduates to fill the need in the industry. Previous studies have shown similar results. To meet the need for college-trained teachers, researchers, technicians, and scientists in agriculture, it is obvious that we in agriculture need to find ways to attract students who are not currently seeing agriculture as a viable career option.

Similar shortages exist in the field of agricultural education. In nearly every state in my region, there are some agricultural education programs each year that must use teachers on provisional certificates because qualified, licensed agricultural education instructors are not available. The problem is not that

the nation's colleges and universities are not turning out enough agricultural education graduates, the problem is that most schools will only place one-third to one-half their agricultural education graduates in teaching positions. Agricultural education graduates are in enough demand for positions outside the classroom that without higher salaries for beginning teachers, this trend will continue.

Fewer and fewer Americans have had any background or experience with agricultural production, even from visiting a grandparent's farm. It is important to the future of agriculture and to developing practical agricultural policy that more and more Americans understand where their food comes from as well as the connection between production, stewardship of the nation's natural resources, care and welfare of animals, and other issues.

The bulk of federal support for career and technical education in agriculture comes through Perkins funding through the U.S. Department of Education. However, several years ago, the U.S.D.A. recognized the need to support the agricultural education effort directly and instituted the Secondary and Two-Year Postsecondary Education Challenge (SPEC) Grant Program. This program provides an opportunity for high school and community college agricultural education programs to compete for grants to improve their programs. I was fortunate enough to be a grant recipient through this program in 2004-2005. The grant purchased classroom quantities of handheld computers with GPS cards, GPS mapping software, and other equipment I am using to build new skills in my students at Pratt Community College. This program has had many positive impacts on agricultural education programs across the country.

So what can the new farm bill do to strengthen and improve the system of agricultural education in the United States? Here are some suggestions: (1) continued and increased support for the SPEC grant program; (2) incentive funds to schools that to start new agricultural education programs; (3) grant support to get new and emerging technologies into high school and community college agricultural education programs; and (4) incentive programs for agriculture students to become agriculture teachers.

**Continued and increased support for the SPEC grant program.** The Secondary and Two-Year Postsecondary Educational Challenge Grant program is administered through the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) of USDA. Funding for the program has remained level for several years at \$1 million, with half of the money for grants to secondary agricultural education programs and half for community college and other postsecondary agricultural education programs.

**Incentive funds to schools that start new agricultural education programs.** Compared to other programs in the public schools, agricultural education programs are expensive to start and to run. The investment in facilities, shop equipment, classroom equipment, a greenhouse, and supplies for all of these in addition to salary and fringe benefits for the instructor would be prohibitive for many districts to start an agricultural education program from scratch. A grant program that would provide the greatest support the first year, and scaled-back support in a second and third year would gradually move full support to the local school district.

**Grant support to get new and emerging technologies into high school and community college agricultural education programs.** My own experience with the purchase of GPS equipment is a case in point. New and emerging technologies are expensive. To integrate these technologies into agricultural education classrooms will require additional investment.

**Incentive programs for agriculture students to become agriculture teachers.** The profession has worked on this problem for many years, and continues to seek solutions to recruit more students into teacher education programs in agricultural education. One suggestion might be a program whereby part of their student loans could be forgiven for each year that agricultural education teachers work in underserved areas.

I would be happy to answer any questions about these comments. Please feel free to contact me at Pratt Community College, 348 NE SR61, Pratt, KS, 67124, by telephone at (620) 672-5641, X239, or by email at [billh@pratcc.edu](mailto:billh@pratcc.edu).